

Electronic Church, media religiosity, mediatized religiosity: Concepts to reflect on the relationship between media and religion

Igreja eletrônica, religiosidade midiática, religiosidade midiaticizada: Conceitos para pensar as relações entre mídia e religião

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ABSTRACT

The increasing number of studies on media and religion has favored the emergence of different views on the phenomenon, resulting in different methodologies, theories, and concepts. This paper discusses the recurrent concepts used by researchers in this area, especially in Brazil, showing how they help us understand particular aspects of this problem, as well as its possible limitations. Through a bibliographic review, we reflect on the productivity of general concepts like *the electronic church, media religiosity, mediatized religiosity* to think on the transformations of contemporary religion in its interconnections with the media.

Keywords: Electronic church, mediatization of religion, media and religion, mediatic religiosity, mediatized religiosity

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RESUMO

O crescente número de pesquisas sobre mídia e religião tem favorecido a emergência de um conjunto diverso de olhares sobre o fenômeno, o que se reflete em diferentes metodologias, teorias e conceitos. Este artigo objetiva discutir conceitos recorrentes em trabalhos de pesquisadores desta área, sobretudo no Brasil, e indicar de que modo nos ajudam a entender aspectos dessa problemática, bem como possíveis limitações. Assim, por meio de revisão bibliográfica, reflete-se sobre a produtividade de conceitos gerais como *igreja eletrônica, religiosidade midiática, religiosidade midiaticizada* para pensar as transformações da religião na contemporaneidade nas suas interconexões com a mídia.

Palavras-chave: Igreja eletrônica, midiaticização da religião, mídia e religião, religiosidade midiática, religiosidade midiaticizada

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MATRIZES

INTRODUCTION

THE PUBLICATION OF academic papers that seek to systematize aspects of scientific production on a given topic suggests that it has already acquired a certain degree of representativeness in the scientific community. Other clues are the holding of events, formation of scientific associations and research groups, publication of dossiers in journals, and the creation of specialized scientific journals in the area. Studies on communication and religion show signs of having achieved such recognition in the United States and Europe, where we verify “the existence of specialized scientific journals with more than ten years of continuous publication, such as the *Journal of Communication and Religion*, *Journal of Media and Religion* and *Journal of Pop Culture and Religion*” (Martino, 2012, p. 219). To these we can add the *Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet* and the *Journal of Religion, Media, and Digital Culture*.

The Brazilian scenario also shows signs of this consolidation. Focusing on initiatives in the field of communication studies¹, we can cite:

1. Events: a) Conferência Brasileira de Comunicação Eclesial (Eclesiocom): promoted from 2006 to 2017 by UNESCO Communication Chair from Universidade Metodista de São Paulo (UMESP); b) I Jornada de Mídias e Religiões (2012) and International Seminar on Research on Mediatization and Social Processes (2016, 2018, 2019), which has always relied on Working Groups on mediatization and religion; both events were organized by the Graduate Program in Communication from Universidade do Vale do Rio dos Sinos (UNISINOS); c) Intercom National Congress, which since 2018 relies, in its annual editions, on the research group (RG) Communication and Religion (coordinators: Magali do Nascimento Cunha and Ricardo Alvarenga).
2. The work of research groups such as Media, Religion, and Culture, from UESP (leaders: Magali do Nascimento Cunha and Jorge Miklos, ended in 2018²); Media circulation and communication strategies, from UFSM (leaders: Aline Dalmolin and Viviane Borelli); Advertising in New Media and Consumer Narratives, from UFPE (leaders: Karla Patriota and Rogério Covaleski), Communication and Religiosity, from UFG (leaders: Luiz Signates and Ângela Moraes); Mediatization and Social Processes (leaders: Antonio Fausto Neto and Pedro Gilberto Gomes); and Circulation, Image, and Mediatization Laboratory (leader: Ana Paula da Rosa) from UNISINOS.

¹Note that the topic has attracted the attention of researchers from theology, religious studies, history, sociology, anthropology, among others, resulting in fruitful dialogues between the different areas. Given the difficulty in mapping this wide territory, however, we will limit ourselves, in this work, to list only some of the contributions from researchers within Communication Studies.

²Information available at the Research Groups Directory of Conselho Nacional de Desenvolvimento Científico e Tecnológico (CNPq). Once the group ended, its activities (meetings, research projects, events, etc.) were relocated to the Intercom Communication and Religion Research Group.

3. The publication, in recent years (2015, no. 2, and 2016, no. 2), of two dossiers by the journal *Comunicação e Informação* and one by the *Unesco/Metodista de Comunicação Regional Yearbook* (2016), besides works that bring together text collections from several researchers, such as: *Mídia e Religião na Sociedade do Espetáculo* (Marques de Melo et al., 2007); *Mídia e Religião: Entre o Mundo da Fé e o Fiel* (Borelli, 2010); *Mídias e Religião: A Comunicação e a Fé em Sociedades em Mídiação* (Fausto Neto et al., 2013); *Mídia, Religião e Cultura: Percepções e Tendências em Perspectiva Global* (Belotti & Cunha, 2016); *Mitos, Mídias e Religiões na Cultura Contemporânea* (Klein & Camargo, 2017); *Umbanda, Cultura e Comunicação: Olhares e Encruzilhadas* (Camargo, 2019); and *Comunicação, Linguagens e Religiões* (Cunha & Storto, 2020). Also of note is the book *Mídia, Religião e Sociedade: Das Palavras Às Redes Digitais*, by Luís Mauro Sá Martino, released in 2016.
4. Production of papers that seek to map aspects of studies in communication and religion (Cunha, 2002, 2009, 2016; P. G. Gomes, 2010; Martino, 2012, 2015, 2016; Patriota et al., 2016).

The points listed suggest that the topic of communication and religion has not only sparked the interest of researchers from several graduate programs in communication in Brazil, but has also led to efforts aimed at consolidating spaces for dialogue. It is no longer a matter of specific investigations by one or another researcher, but rather of constituting arrangements that converge to foster discussion and promote stability and visibility to the topic as an object of scientific research.

This paper adds to the systematization efforts mentioned in the last topic. In the wake of works by Assmann (1986), Cunha (2002, 2009), P. G. Gomes (2010), and Martino (2016), recurring terms used to understand issues related to the articulations between media and religion will be presented and discussed, focusing on three general concepts: *the electronic church, media religiosity, and mediatized religiosity*³.

ELECTRONIC CHURCH: A CONCEPT AND/OR EXPRESSION OF RELIGION IN THE MEDIA

Electronic church is one of the oldest terms and the one that initially became more popular in academia and the press to refer to Christian religious initiatives on television. It derives from the expression *electric church*, from

³ It is important here to differentiate between religiosity and religion. Generally, the term religion refers to the institutional dimension, which includes doctrines, rituals, and norms established by an organization. Religiosity, in turn, deals with the experiential and pragmatic scope in the lives of believers, referring to how they negotiate with the offers (symbolic, practical, etc.) from institutions. For further information, see Gomes, Farina, and Forno (2014), and Rodrigues (2019). We can also speak of spirituality, which is equivalent to any practices “which maintain contact between the everyday world and a more general meta-empirical picture of meaning through individual manipulation of symbolic systems” (Hanegraaff, 2017, p. 406), whether they are or not linked to an established religious institution. The concept of religiosity encompasses that of spirituality, corresponding to a type of spirituality linked to an existing religious institution. Spirituality, in turn, may or may not depend on a religious institution. As an example of non-institutionalized spirituality, Hanegraaff (2017) cites the New Age movement. We chose the term religiosity to formulate concepts because it preserves a relationship with the organizational sphere, but is not restricted to it. The term religion is used to emphasize institutional aspects or in the sense of social fact, a current use among researchers in this field of studies. We intend to explore these distinctions in future texts.



the work *The Electric Church*, published in 1979, in the United States, by Ben Armstrong, former president of the National Religious Broadcast, an association created by religious groups with a media presence aiming to defend their interests with US public agencies. Armstrong saw the electronic church as a religious interest of a missionary nature, classifying it as an “authentic and miraculous continuation of the New Testament Church”⁴ (Barka, 2000, p. 32).

⁴In the original: “continuation authentique et miraculeuse de l’Eglise du Nouveau Testament” (Barka, 2000, p. 32). This and other translations, by the author.

Schultze, in turn, analyzing it from an academic perspective, defines the term based on six main characteristics:

With rare exceptions, he writes, the main ministries [pastors/priests] on television in the United States are: 1) financed by donations from viewers, 2) organized around a personality, 3) authenticated by the experiences created, 4) use refined techniques, 5) are designed for fun and, 6) marked by the spirit of conquest⁵. (Schultze, 1991, p. 28, cited by Barka, 2000, p. 31)

⁵In the original: “A de rares exceptions près, écrit-il, les principaux “ministères” à la télévision aux Etats-Unis sont 1) financés par les dons des auditeurs, 2) organisés autour d’une personnalité-vedette, 3) authentifiés par les expériences provoquées, 4) mis au bénéfice des techniques les plus raffinées, 5) conçues pour divertir et 6) marquées par l’esprit de conquête”.

Besides the aspects listed by Schultze, another common aspect of the religious broadcasts lies in the fundamentalist interpretations of the Bible (Cunha, 2002, p. 5). The concept of electronic church is directly related to the North American context and actions of the so-called televangelists (religious leaders who use television as their preferred vehicle for their initiatives in the media field), between the 50s and 80s. In this period, representatives from the Protestant world, such as Billy Graham, Pat Robertson, Oral Roberts, Jerry Falwell, and Rex Humbard, led successful programs on US TV, which also expanded to other continents.

The *spirit of conquest*, the fundamentalist interpretation of the Bible, and the prominent role played by charismatic leadership find antecedents in the work of itinerant preachers who toured the United States in the 19th and early 20th centuries, holding revival meetings in both urban and rural areas (the so-called *camp meetings*, held in large tents)⁶. Another source that may have inspired televangelists were the radio programs presented by religious leaders.

⁶According to Campos (1995), the actions of itinerant preachers and *camp meetings* also appear as precursors of the Pentecostal movement, which emerged in the first decade of the 20th century.

The first incidences of religion in a US radio station occurred in 1912 when, on an experimental basis, a Christmas religious service was broadcast in Massachusetts. Only on the following decade, however, would we see a growing interest from priests and pastors for this means of communication. In 1920, the first North American commercial radio station, KDKA, was created in Pittsburgh; in the following year, it already had a program that broadcasted the Sunday worship of a local church, an attraction that saw immediate success (Gutwirth, 1998, p. 17).

The radio spread rapidly across the country, taking religion with it. In 1925, about sixty US radio stations (10% of the total) belonged to churches or institutions connected to them. This expansion would be halted in 1927 with the creation of the *Federal Radio Commission* (FRC), the government agency that first regulated the broadcasting system in the United States. High tax rates led many religious radio stations to bankruptcy. In 1933, only 33 of them remained in operation (Gutwirth, 1998, p. 17).

It caused many churches to migrate their programs to generalist radio stations, a process facilitated by an FRC rule that made it mandatory for radio stations to air *programs of general interest*, which opened a loophole for including religious programs for free. Companies, however, favored ceding space to the traditional historical Protestant and Roman Apostolic Catholic Churches, forcing fundamentalist preachers and their institutions to buy airtime and ask for donations during the broadcast to maintain these initiatives. Depending on audience funding, pastors were encouraged to create more attractive programs, a formula that was later copied by televangelists. Meanwhile, the beneficiaries of free airtime continued in a format similar to biblical services/masses and sermons (Gutwirth, 1998, p. 18).

During this period of consolidation of *radio evangelism*, figures such as Aimée McPerson (founder of the Church of the Foursquare Gospel), Charles Fuller, and the Catholic clergy Charles Coughlin and Fulton Sheen gained the spotlight. Both McPerson and Fuller figure as immediate precursors to televangelists, but especially the first, whose relationship with music and her performance as a presenter foreshadows names like Oral Roberts and Jimmy Swaggart, who also performed on the radio. Other personalities of the *electronic church* include Graham, Falwell, and Robertson.

Despite performing on the radio, it is mainly through television that these figures reached notoriety. Despite the common aspects – centrality of the televangelist's image (to the detriment of the religious institution), authentication through the viewer, use of a refined technique, its entertainment-focused conception, its funding by the public, the spirit of conquest, and the fundamentalist interpretation of biblical precepts (Cunha, 2002; Schultze, 1991, cited by Barka, 2000) – the preaching emphasis varied.

Rex Humbard focused his message on family: his family participated in the programs and sang together – music was the highlight of the program. He was not explicit about political-ideological positions and preached economic-financial prosperity as a divine blessing. Jimmy Swaggart also exploited his musical gift: he had many albums recorded and featured them on the programs. He also explored



rhetoric in long sermons with intense body and emotional expression. There was a space in the programming for Bible courses and doctrinal classes, during which he vigorously criticized the Christian churches. . . . Pat Robertson had a slight presence in Brazil. His program was mainly entertainment, a religious variety show, with a powerful emphasis on US neo-conservative politics – an example was the pro-Ronald Reagan open campaign. (Cunha, 2002, p. 5)

The term electronic church was initially formulated to explain North American televangelism. Subsequent academic studies either preserved it, but expanded its scope (Martín-Barbero, 1995); or considered it insufficient both for the issues related to the context of televangelists (Assmann, 1986) and for other developments in the relationship between media and religion (Cunha, 2002). Let us take a look at the first point.

Discussing the issue of secularization in Latin America, Martín-Barbero (1995) argues that by entering media spaces religion once again becomes magic, opening up the possibility for the re-enchantment of daily life, which would therefore contradict the trend towards growing disenchantment with the world, as postulated by the secularization theory of European and North American authors. In using the term *electronic church*, Martín-Barbero refers to its historical affiliations, but expands its application beyond its initial context.

By electronic church I understand the phenomenon that began in the United States and spread throughout Latin America mainly through the Pentecostal churches, and their more intensive use of the mass media, constituting a ‘cultural revolution’; this implied the conversion of millions of people to Protestant sects, of millions of Catholics to the Protestant world, and above all to the world of the most fundamentalist churches, like Pentecostals⁷. (Martín-Barbero, 1995, p. 76)

Martín-Barbero (1995) also proposes a reflection that expands how the electronic church had been thought of until then:

Electronic church then means the following: churches that do not limit themselves to using the media to widen the audience of their sermons, *do not limit themselves to using the media to broaden the spectrum of audiences they reach* [emphasis added]. To me, electronic churches are churches that have been converted especially to radio and TV, making TV and radio a *fundamental mediation of the religious experience* [emphasis added]. That is to say, *the medium is not simply an aid to amplify the voice, but an important element, a fundamental*

⁷In the original: “Entiendo por iglesia electrónica, el fenómeno que se inició en Estados Unidos extendiéndose por América Latina principalmente a través de las iglesias pentecostales, y su uso más intensivo de los medios masivos constituyéndose en una «revolución cultural» por lo que implica el paso de millones de gentes a las sectas protestantes, de millones de católicos al mundo protestante, y sobre todo al mundo de las iglesias más fundamentalistas como las pentecostales”.

element of the religious contact, the religious celebration, the religious experience [emphasis added]⁸. (p. 76)

By reflection on the media as a fundamental element of the religious experience in contemporaneity, the author goes beyond the view then present in the first academic studies, whereby authors understood (and deciphered) the electronic church as marketing strategies used by televangelists to improve their visibility and that of their respective institutions. Understanding the electronic church involves understanding the constitution of media as a mediation of religion in contemporary times.

Like Martín-Barbero, Hugo Assmann (1986), in his work *The Electronic Church and its impact in Latin America* (one of the first published in Brazil on the topic), also works with a concept of electronic church not restricted to the immediate context of North American televangelists. Unlike the Colombian researcher, however, Assmann relates the term to a specific aspect of media-religious productions that implies thinking about the handling of advertising techniques. According to the author, “some authors see a positive side to this terminology because, despite being ideological, *it insinuates the handling of advertising techniques* as almost all religious TV programs do” (Assmann, 1986, p. 18, emphasis added); while others criticize this notion due to the inappropriate use of the term church, considering that what exists are not exactly churches, but the presence of their representatives in the media (Assmann, 1986). Despite agreeing with the criticism, Assmann still uses the term in his work.

Cunha (2002, 2009), in turn, makes an incisive criticism, suggesting the insufficiency of the concept. The author’s argument is twofold: 1) it shows that what one conventionally calls electronic church exclude aspects related to the presence of religion in the media when considering developments of the phenomenon in Brazilian society; and 2) it contests the use of the terms *church* and *electronic*.

Unlike the United States, where television was most sought, religious leaders in Brazil adopted the radio as a privileged medium. This was due to the high costs of television broadcasting, compared to radio, and the fact that initially the Roman Apostolic Catholic Church and the historical Protestants – who then had more financial resources – showed little interest in the media, in contrast to Pentecostal churches, especially those that emerged in the country from the 50s and 60s. The latter preferred to invest in radio programs due to the lower costs. Other specific aspects of national scope are pointed out by Cunha (2002, 2009):

⁸In the original: “Iglesia electrónica entonces significa lo siguiente: unas iglesias que no se limitan a utilizar los medios de comunicación para hacer más amplia la audiencia de sus sermones, no se limitan a usar los medios para hacer más ancho el espectro de público al que llegan. A mi ver las iglesias electrónicas son iglesias que se han convertido especialmente al medio radio y al medio TV, haciendo de la TV y de la radio una mediación fundamental de la experiencia religiosa. Es decir, el medio no es simplemente una ayuda para amplificar la voz sino que es un elemento importante, un elemento fundamental del contacto religioso, de la celebración religiosa, de la experiencia religiosa”.



1. The presence of churches (Universal, Catholic, Renascer, Mundial, among others) on radio and TV both as buyers of paid airtime and owners of their channels. In the North American context, the media insertion was much more due to the performance of preachers who often distanced themselves from their institutions. In Brazil, churches played a predominant role, and the link with their leaders was explicit and valued;
2. If, until the 60s and 80s, radio and television programs favored preaching, today we have a much more diversified content, with entertainment programs, news, music videos, debates, and interviews, among others. Printed media also follows this trend, with variety magazines aimed at the religious public. Religious media have become increasingly similar to their secular counterparts;
3. The *salvation-miracles-fundraising* axis, characteristic of US televangelist broadcasts, gives rise to an emphasis on preaching economic prosperity as the result of God's blessing and spiritual warfare against the devil and his entourage of fallen angels, especially in programs of Neo-Pentecostal churches (Universal, Renascer, Mundial, Internacional da Graça, Bola de Neve, etc.). Besides, several topics such as depression, stress, drugs, and family crises are now being approached and treated religiously;
4. In the 60s and 80s, programs focused on the charismatic leadership of clergy members. Later, although leaders continued to play an important role, it became increasingly common to see the emergence of personalities presenting programs geared to a specific target audience (youth, children, adults with sentimental problems, etc.) (Cunha, 2002).

Besides these contextual and historical aspects, the author disagrees with the use of the terms *church* and *electronic*:

The "Church" and its leaderships can be exposed in the propaganda of Rede Gospel or Rede Record, but (...) the emphasis of the message transmitted is not on the "Church" and adherence to it, but on cultivating a religiosity that does not depend on the Church, but that is intimate, autonomous, and individualized. *What is emphasized is not the Church, but the religious experience mediated by the TV or radio; that is, the medium enables the cultivation of religiosity, regardless of adherence to a community of faith* [emphasis added]. The term "Electronic" also does not reflect the process experienced today. This notion refers to the

idea of “mass” centered on the use of the technological apparatus offered by the electronic media for disseminating the religious message – and here we could also highlight information technology with the offer of an infinite number of Internet pages of a religious nature. (Cunha, 2002, p. 18)

Cunha’s (2002, 2010) approach recalls that of Martín-Barbero, although abandoning the term *electronic church*. In a perspective more close to Cultural Studies, the author proposes the concept of *media religiosity*.

MEDIA RELIGIOSITY AND OTHER ALTERNATIVE CONCEPTS TO ELECTRONIC CHURCH

One can say that US televangelism was one of the main factors responsible for awakening, in academia, the interest in understanding the relationship between media and religion (Bruce, 1990, cited by Martino, 2016). According to Martino, this interest first emerged in studies from sociology of religion in the 1960s, in which the media was still a secondary element. In the 1980s, the *first approaches* in the area of communication appeared, with studies on Ecclesial Communication. From the 1990s onwards, research developments in this area led to a diversification of topics (Martino, 2016, p. 19).

At first, the communication field sought inspiration in sociological references (mainly, sociology of religion and Critical Theory); later, it underwent epistemological shifts resulting from the creation and development of theoretical references in the field itself. This change also resulted from the diversification of the phenomena that involve media and religion, such as: the investments of Neo-Pentecostal churches and the charismatic renewal in the electronic and digital media, and the entry of mediumistic religions (Umbanda, Candomblé, and Kardecist Spiritism) in these media (Martino, 2016). From a media landscape that was sometimes instrumental and focused mainly on the effects produced by religious broadcasts on the public, the field adopted a more comprehensive approach, seeking to understand the types of experiences and meanings built in the articulations of the religious with the media.

Directing our attention to critiques of the concept ‘electronic church’ it is possible to detect evidence of this change. Although our focus in this text is on contributions in the area of communication, the concepts listed below show, however, that the alternative terms come from different areas, revealing both the richness of the interdisciplinary dialogue, and the difficulty in situating accurately the boundaries and contributions of each field:



1. Commercial religion: defended by those who believe that “televangelists do not authentically represent the Church” (Assmann, 1986, p. 19), this expression accentuates the commercial bias of the programs, many of which called for donations and (or) sold products. Assmann criticizes the concept, as not all religious programs have this characteristic. Let us recall, for example, the broadcasts of services and masses, which already featured in the first religious broadcasts on radio and are broadcast on television. Another issue with the concept is that its formulation is limited to a social critique of the televangelists’ performance. William F. Fore, then a member of the United States National Council of Churches and president of the World Association for Christian Communication (WACC), proposed the nomenclature in 1983 due to the ethical and moral issues he saw in using the term church. It has more to do with internal discussions in the religious field than, properly speaking, with organizational, sociological, and historical aspects;
2. Marketing of faith: it suggests that religious television programs follow an advertising model that offers salvation as a commodity: “Suggestion climate – Identification of an ‘unmet need’ – Presentation of the ‘answer’ – Purchasing act” (Assmann, 1986, p. 20). Although better justified than the former, as it seeks to identify a common logic in such programs, the term also has the disadvantage of generalization regarding the commercial aspect; its use would be appropriate for contexts in which researchers identify such logic in operation. In the Brazilian context, we find traces of this model in *television listening programs* of Christian denomination broadcast during the early hours (Fausto Neto, 2004; Sousa, 2014);
3. Electronic messianism: it also emerged as an option to *electronic church*. The messianic character refers to religious leaders in the media and their promises of healings, miracles, and salvation. Assmann (1986), however, disagrees with such definition. According to him, “it would be a shame if the biblical (and even sociological) concept of ‘messianism,’ so full of hope and historical struggles, was debased in this way” (Assmann, 1986, p. 21). Besides the tensions that can arise in religious circles and some academic approaches, as pointed out by Assmann (1986), the term is limited to specific religious contexts, notably in the Christian sphere;
4. Electronic assembly: unlike the previous ones, it seems detached from the phenomenon in the United States. It expresses a distinct

concern from the others, being more used in the Catholic intellectual milieu to designate the possibility of a communal experience in television and radio broadcasts of liturgical celebrations. Although still keeping the problematic *electronic* signifier, its formulation has the advantage of going beyond the market logic that remains present in the other ones (Assmann, 1986). By preserving the sense of community experience via media, the concept could expand beyond the Catholic context, and with a simple substitution of words (electronic for media) lose the instrumental content. *Media assembly* could be a useful term for studies addressing experiences that center on the interaction between the faithful and those who conduct religious services/ceremonies/events in a media environment. There are no predefined media⁹.

Concepts 1 to 4, briefly discusses in Assmann's (1986) *The Electronic Church and its Impact on Latin America* as possible options to the concept of electronic church. The origins of these criticisms are not always clear, but they start mainly from theology and sociology of religion, the author's areas of activity. Assmann (1986) also criticizes the term *electronic church*, but prefers to leave open the issue on which formulation would be the most appropriate since there were still few studies on the phenomenon in the United States and Latin America. He preserves thus the use, but chooses to do so in quotation marks.

The next terms began to appear in academic texts in the communication area from the 2000s. Expressions 5 and 6 address the articulations between religion and digital media; *media religiosity* (7), in turn, emerges as a possible substitute for *electronic church*.

5. *Cyber church* and virtual church: both relate to the performance of churches on the web, which includes officiating services and ceremonies in the digital world that were previously available only in person. When analyzing the two expressions, P. G. Gomes (2010) suggests that the former is more appropriate, since the virtual signifier refers to "experiencing something before its configuration as being real. . . . However, this cannot be applied to the Church. A virtual community cannot be experienced beforehand" (p. 45).
6. Cyber-religion (Miklos, 2010), digital religion (Cunha, 2016), religion 2.0 (Patriota & Freire, 2015): we found no rigid definitions justifying the authors' choice of one term over the other; they can also appear as synonyms for each other in the same text. All three are more

⁹The Covid-19 pandemic forced many groups to migrate their religious activities to the media (radio, television and, mainly, the internet). It created a rich experimental scenario that deserves academic attention.



comprehensive, not being restricted to the Christian institutional scope, such as *cyber church* and virtual church. Despite being used as a synonym for the others, the term *religion 2.0* seems to have a more specific scope, describing a phase in the development of the web (2.0). Generally, such terms designate the religious presence in the digital world, arising from the need to name a phenomenon based on the specific objects analyzed by the authors. Research development can lead to future systematizations that would be very welcome for the area.

7. Media religiosity: concept proposed by Cunha (2002, 2009)¹⁰ as an alternative to electronic church, which the author considers no longer capable of describing the complex relationships between media and religion¹¹. Based on authors from Cultural Studies, such as Martín-Barbero and Stuart Hall, Cunha (2002, 2009) brings up the notion of media culture, a critical response to the expression mass culture, born in an academic context that saw the reception of majorities as standardized and subordinated to the intentionality of the *ns* of the *cultural industry*.

Media culture [emphasis added] goes further by reflecting the paradigm of globalization and consumption: the market, across countries, *would have consolidated itself as a fundamental instance of meaning production* [emphasis added]. In this context, the masses would no longer matter, but the market. In media culture, difference and standardization coexist synchronously, as it is within the market, the basis of this culture, where individuals and social groups build their identities, share life expectations, ways of being, and power becomes virtualized. (Cunha, 2002, p. 12)

According to the author, the *media religiosity* that emerges linked to this culture can be observed on several fronts, like: in the insertion of mass media into religious rites, which become vehicles for promoting *gospel bands'* successes; in the promotion of religious consumer goods that allow the faithful to experience spirituality and leisure at the same time, breaking with the evangelical customs of tradition; in the creation of celebrities who move between the religious and entertainment fields (Cunha, 2009).

As a general concept that reflects on the relations between media and religion, the term *media religiosity* proves more useful than *electronic church*, which limits the media-religious experience to the Christian institutional scope and relates to viewing the public as subordinated to the mercantilist

¹⁰We found no later texts by the author, published in journals and conference annals, discussing the concept of *media religiosity*, nor a review that suggested its insufficiency. It seems evident, however, that the ideas supporting her reflections follow this conception discussed in the cited articles (Cunha, 2002, 2009).

¹¹Hartmann (2002) also uses the term, but does not propose a definition. Instead, he applies it to differentiate the actions of Brazilian televangelists regarding the *electronic church*, which he associates with the actions of US televangelists.

logic. *Media religiosity* recognizes the economic aspect as an integral part of this reality, but does not limit understanding the phenomenon to the mere identification of market strategies. The central point, in this perspective, is the consolidation of an instance of meaning production – the religious experience configured in the media. Cunha (2002, 2009) thus starts from Martín-Barbero’s contributions (1995), but advances by proposing a concept that overcomes the terminological and contextual limitations of *electronic church*.

The concept of *media religiosity* has three advantages. First, it updates the discussion on the relationship between media and religion. Second, by incorporating more flexible and comprehensive signifiers, it opens up the possibility of addressing phenomena that although showing no explicit link to a religious or media organization¹², include references to the religious world. Finally, it suggests the formation and consolidation of forms of religious culture that have the media as one of its defining elements.

Another concept that has been of key importance in the development of research on media and religion in the field of communication emerges from studies on mediatization.

The concept of mediatization and the mediatized religiosity

Mediatized, religion is transformed. The word *transformation* is crucial to our understanding of the concept of mediatization. Despite the particular formulations and applications,

we can define mediatization as a concept used to analyse the (longterm) interrelation between media-communicative and socio-cultural change in a critical manner. (Hepp, 2014, p. 51)

Similarly, P. G. Gomes (2016) states that “mediatization is used as a concept to describe the process of expansion of different technical media and to consider the interrelations between media communicative change and sociocultural change” (p. 1).

As such, mediatization is not simply about the presence of the media in religion; the mere broadcast of a religious service on the radio or television does not mean that it has been mediatized. “Mediatization begins the moment media . . . become part of individual and institutional activities. When social processes take on new configurations, gaining other shapes and contours; then one can start thinking in terms of mediatization” (Martino, 2016, pp. 36-37).

¹²Hence the use of the term *religiosity* instead of *religion*, which is closer to the institutional sphere. In this sense, Iuri Andréas Reblin’s thesis (2012) is an interesting example, where the author analyzes aspects of Christian religiosity in comic book heroes, such as Superman and Shazam.



¹³One can question whether, from the reception's perspective, listening to the service on the radio would be a mediatized religious experience, since there has been a change in the way of experiencing the ritual. This discussion, however, goes beyond the scope of this paper.

¹⁴While it is not our goal to map this discussion, it is important to note that in 2014, the English Deacon and Stanyer (2014) published an article criticizing the mediatization research. One of the points highlighted was precisely the risk of slipping into "media-centrism." This text led to a response from Hjarvard, Lundby, and Hepp (2015), where the authors argued for distinguishing media-centrism from media-centered research, which corresponds to their specific effort to study the role of media without, however, placing it as a conditioning agent of society.

¹⁵Several approaches work with the concept of mediatization. Among them, we highlight three especially used in works published in Brazil: institutionalist, constructivist, and interactive discourse semiotics. European authors, such as Stig Hjarvard (institutionalist) and Andreas Hepp (constructivist), represent the first two; the third was developed especially by Latin American researchers, among them: Eliseo Verón, Mario Carlón, Ana Paula da Rosa, Viviane Borelli, José Luiz Braga, Jairo Ferreira, Antonio Fausto Neto, and Pedro Gilberto Gomes. We will not go into further detail, as it is beyond the scope of this article.

¹⁶We started from Martino's proposal (2012), which identifies three trends: 1) religiosity in the secular media; 2) media productions by religious organizations; 3) discussions on mediatization and secularization.

The first experiences of priests and pastors on North American radio showed the mere transposition of the Sunday sermons to this vehicle, which constitutes a media practice, but not necessarily a mediatized one. From the perspective of its production¹³, there was no transformation within the linguistic sphere, in the way of performing/being a religion. The need for funding, however, led fundamentalist preachers to create better, attractive broadcasts, incorporating the radio language into the construction of the religious message. In this case, it is possible to speak of mediatization of religion, since there was a transformation of the religious practice in its articulation with the media.

Mediatization, however, does not correspond to the mere submission of society to a supposed media influence, which would lead to the risk of media-centrism¹⁴, that is, taking the media as a single axis that determines social processes. What we have is rather an exchange between the "logic of the media" (Hjarvard, 2014) and the logic of other social fields mediated by the actions of field operators and the social actors who jointly and heterogeneously build new social practices. It is in this interim that we can locate the "logics of mediatization" (Braga, 2015); they emerge from this contact, this friction between different logics that sometimes overlap, sometimes harmonize, that interact with each other, managed by the experiences and actions of social actors. They constitute spiral and multidirectional paths in constant reconfiguration whose destination is unpredictable. It is up to the researcher to choose positions (the place from which to analyze) and observation points (what is analyzed), and outline how these points connect, combine, and articulate with others in social action, thus constituting arrangements. This means adopting a theoretical approach and methodology best suited to the configurations of the research object and the question asked¹⁵.

Considering the interactions between social fields and actors in their relationship with the religious dimension (organizations, symbols, languages, beliefs, etc.), we systematize below studies on mediatization of religion and religiosity on four fronts¹⁶, including the following research emphases: 1) the religious in the secular media; 2) media productions by religious organizations; 3) the participation of the media (and media field) in the interaction between the religious and other social fields; 4) the religious in the media production of individuals and groups on the internet. We do not intend to propose a rigid classification of the investigations, assigning them to one trend or another; doing so goes against the heterogeneous nature of the research and its mutual intersections. Ours is an organization proposal

that allows identifying the trends and interests of researchers regarding the mediatization process of religion and religiosity.

1. Secular media → religious. It reflects, above all, on fictional and non-fictional media productions that build narratives in which characters, personalities, institutions from existing or fictional religious worlds appear or even establish their religious universe in their plots. Research reveals ways of religiosity contact outside religious organizations. In a study conducted in Denmark, Hjarvard observed an increase in the amount of religious content in the media since the 90s, which includes everything from fictional productions to television programs that address the paranormal, supernatural, or institutional issues of religions (Hjarvard, 2006). Citing Jenkins, he states that *fan cultures* have come to bear many similar aspects to religious groups, despite the different “objects of worship”. Hjarvard also highlights the role secular media play in updating and recreating rituals, such as weddings and funerals, which may dispute or share interests with the churches. He concludes that, although there is no uniform impact, mediatization allows us to speak of re-sacralization of society through the media, the loss of institutional authority of religions, and the promotion of increasingly secularized rituals (Hjarvard, 2006). Still on this aspect, we can also cite studies that focus on symbolic configurations implicitly supported by the religious, as Bratosin (2004) does when analyzing the construction of a mythical representation in the public communications of former French President Jacques Chirac with the use of the significant *concertation*.
2. Religious media → the religious. It focus on how religious organizations appropriate media. Mediatization appears here through the actions of the organizations themselves, which see the media as a strategic space. It seeks to observe the implications for religious institutions, their internal (faithful) and external (non-faithful) audiences. It reflects on the production or the reception of such media productions. Research in this area has reflected on the reconfiguration of religious language and its rituals based on discourses that, despite their particular nuances (more or less conversionist), take into account techno-discursive strategies that excel in affection, emotion, and the creation of a connection that compensate for spatial non-simultaneity. Analyzing Catholic and Evangelical productions on the Brazilian TV, Fausto Neto (2003) observes that, in common, a “religiosity of contact” emerges in the



broadcasts through which the physical distance is compensated by a language that excels in proximity, following an interactional dynamic that resembles that of medical and psychotherapeutic offices. Sbardelotto (2012), in turn, discusses the configuration of mediatized rituals in Catholic websites where users can, for example, light a candle or pray the rosary online. Such possibilities elaborate “not only a media-assisted liturgy, but also a liturgy centered, lived, practiced, and experienced through media, which also offers models for liturgical practices, space, and imagery” (Sbardelotto, 2012, p. 12). Sousa’s study (2018a) of rituals in the television programs of Igreja Universal do Reino de Deus points out that the mediatization of religion can establish points of sacredness in the media. The blessing of the glass of water on the television and the exorcisms performed during phone participation do not only bring innovations in languages and practices for the religious field, but also establish other forms of relating to the media (including its technological device) that are absent from secular media. In other words, the logic of mediatization affects the media itself, since it takes place in an interrelation dynamic between the media field and other social fields, and not by mere submission to a supposed media influence.

3. Religious field ← media → other social fields. It discusses how the media participates in the relationships established between the religious field, social fields, and social actors. Writings on this front reflect on strategies for occupying spaces in the media and/or the discursive-media configurations that emerge from this occupation. The religious and the media become public spaces for disputes over power and meaning in society. Research has highlighted, for example, the role of the religious organizations and their representatives on electoral disputes (Martino, 2014; Damasio, 2020), of parliamentarians linked to the religious field, and the respective reactions of individuals on the media, especially on digital social media (Marques & Guimarães, 2018). This occurs not only when the religious field shifts its performance to the public sphere by interfering in the configuration of specific phenomena and practices of other social fields, such as the political one, but also in the opposite direction. Viviane Borelli’s doctoral thesis (2007) on the mediatization of the Medianeira pilgrimage (Santa Maria, RS) by Rede Vida de Televisão, constitutes an interesting

example of analysis of the actions from the political, economic, and public security fields alongside the religious one in configuring a mediatized pilgrimage.

4. Individuals' media → religiosity. The advent of the internet and especially social media allowed social actors to produce media content, which was previously restricted to media organizations and entities with financial power. The internet emerges as a space of experimentation and bricolage, where individuals seek ways to engage with the religious universe. Religious rituals are reconfigured in initiatives such as WhatsApp prayer groups (Sousa, 2018b) and Facebook pages and groups that address religion doctrine or current themes from a religious perspective (Rosa, 2018; Sbardelotto, 2014), favoring groups of individuals that are physically distant from each other but share the same interest¹⁷. This scenario favors the emergence of religious leaders who are not part of an institution's ecclesiastical board, but discuss and make religion present in the public space¹⁸ – an uberized religious authority (Tudor & Herteliu, 2017). Such phenomenon challenges the institutions that, faced with this reality, find themselves in need of establishing new points of contact in the public space, thus generating reflections in the scope of theology with *cyber-theologies* (Spadaro, 2012). Another challenge arises when there is a profusion of negative criticism and digital lynching campaigns on social media. If before, crisis management by religious organizations took place by actions and negotiations between the religious field and the other social fields, it now spills over to a multitude of profiles, including fake ones, in social media. While the presence on the Web configures itself as a *quasi-obligation* for the survival of religious organizations in the public space, it also weakens it, exposing the organization and its leaders to the constant public surveillance of social media users.

¹⁷Cunha (2016) mentions the formation of groups of “churchless” followers (p. 14), people who consider themselves religious but do not belong to a specific institution, on social media as a phenomenon of religiosity in the digital environment.

¹⁸In 2017, the Catholic Church granted the person responsible for “The Catechist” blog and Facebook page (administered by lay Catholics) a credential reserved only for sector journalists covering the Vatican. It was the first time in its history that the institution granted this type of authorization to someone living outside Rome (Rosa, 2018).

Research on mediatization calls attention to *religiosity in process*, subject to the injunctions of social fields, the actions of individuals, and the potential offered by communication technologies and the logic of the media field. Mediatized religious practices configure new meaning practices, which speak of a new way of experiencing faith in contemporary times. The *study fronts* described above shed light on partial aspects of this social transformation that affects not only religiosity and religious institutions but also profound changes in society.



The concept of a mediatized religiosity becomes essential to reflect on this reality. One cannot cristalize a specific reality or configuration of the phenomenon, because mediatization deals with a dynamic object that flows and always seems to escape. Researchers are responsible for capturing glimpses, partial realities that allow us to see the whole that generates them. This concept, like that of *media religiosity*, updates the discussion on media and religion, opening the possibility of discussing phenomena that are not necessarily limited to the actions of the institutionalized religious field.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Names are relational; they are ways of narrating the world (Ferrara, 2010). Choosing implies the task of naming things in such a way that when one says what something is, what it is not is implied. To name is to circumscribe and delimit. To conceptualize, in turn, is to name an idea and bring it into the sphere of sensibility, of recognition, that characterizes a phenomenon. According to Ferrara (2010),

if the concept corresponds to that disciplinary and codifying need of the world, its name must correspond to a kind of causal record of the world's manifestations, *so that we believe we know things through the names we assign to the things we want to know* [emphasis added]. (pp. 53-54)

Concepts are of strategic importance for *making science* both because they clarify to the mind the dynamics of how the phenomena of the world work, and their heuristic potential, giving rise to new theorizations; but they also run the risk of cristalizing reality and losing sight of the object. In the 1980s, the concept of *electronic church* played a fundamental role in providing a key to understanding the actions of radio evangelists and, especially, televangelists, drawing the attention of society and the scientific community to the implications of the relationship formed between media and religion.

This concept, however, proved problematic in its origins for two reasons. First, the unproductive association of the signifiers *church* and *electronic*, which we can partialy attribute to its initial non-academic formulation. Second, the subsequent developments in the relationship between media and religion in the Christian sphere, in which emerged different configurations of the media product model centered on religious celebrity and characterized by the handling of advertising techniques focused on an individualized and

intimate experience (Assmann, 1986; Cunha, 2002). Although Martín-Barbero (1995) and Assmann (1986) apply it to think on realities different from those of North American televangelists, the name does not explain the phenomenon it designates. This incompatibility suggests that it should be replaced or, at least, that its use remains only as a reference to the phenomenon of 20th century US televangelism.

In this scenario, *media religiosity* and *mediatized religiosity* appear as alternative propositions of *electronic church*. These formulations emerge from the 1990s and the 2000s in the field of communication, a time when objects and theoretical approaches to reflect on media and religion diversify (Martino, 2016). When analytically compared with the concept of electronic church, one can observe that both terms include more open signifiers, not limiting the reflection to the Christian institutional scope. In this way, they allow expanding, without semantic losses, the reflection to other religions (Buddhism, Islam, Hinduism, Umbanda, Candomblé, Kardecist Spiritism, etc.) and to manifestations that do not necessarily function according to the prescriptions of a religious organization. The use of the term *religiosity* is strategic, because it is impossible to say what is typical of religion, and, at the same time, the phenomena escapes the institutional sphere. This malleability that both concepts suggest is interesting, especially for the area of communication, which deals with the challenge of building a reliable substrate to support the field, but which does not disrespect the characteristic mobility of its object of study (Ferrara, 2010).

Despite the similarities, it would be unwise and counterproductive to level the concepts, since each one has an affinity for specific theoretical approaches, and, therefore, calls attention to particular aspects. While *media religiosity*, proposed by Cunha (2002), is close to Cultural Studies and authors like Martín-Barbero and Stuart Hall, *mediatized religiosity* bears a direct link to mediatization research. With *media religiosity*, we have a certain stabilization of the relationships between media and religiosities that then make up the cultural broth of contemporary society and, therefore, constitute a matrix of meaning through which the religious manifests itself and is experienced. *Mediatized religiosity*, in turn, highlights the procedural character of the phenomenon, which does not correspond to a finished product, but rather subject to reformulations based on the actions of individuals and social fields in their relations with the media, phenomena that encompass changes in the religious, in several spheres (institutional, cultural, and semiotic-discursive interactional).

Despite such differences, the concepts are not mutually exclusive. Regarding their theoretical anchors, both concepts allow for direct approaches, such as



the use of the concept of mediatization by Cunha (2016), or indirect ones, articulating the discussion of the concept of mediatization with developments in Martín-Barbero's mediation theory, as Braga (2012) does by referring to Martín-Barbero's emphasis on the "communicative mediations of culture" (p. 34). More than differ, the concepts seem to be complementary. *Media religiosity* emerges from the mediatization process, stabilizing itself as a reference from which subjects and organizations build their social practices (and practices of meaning) regarding the religious dimension of social action. Such stability does not mean immobility, given the media's permeability to the social processes that make up a religiosity in process, a *mediatized religiosity*.

In other words, the concept of *media religiosity* points out that the transformations resulting from the mediatization of society within the scope of religious practices are not something specific, doomed to disappear, but are rather consolidating a culture that references the subjects' lives in their relationship with the religious. *Mediatized religiosity* suggests that this media religiosity is not a finished product, being subject to continuous reformulations, given the processual character of the mediatization phenomenon. For this reason, it does not make sense to propose that one of these concepts overlaps or cancels the other. Both emerge in different theoretical contexts almost synchronously, resulting from developments of research in media and religion and emphasize different aspects of a phenomenon that we could generally translate as *the consolidation of a religious media culture in permanent transformation*.

The challenge is not exclusion, but searching for points of approximation and refinement of these concepts based on successive tests in the research that would allow us to observe to what extent they help us answer the questions we ask our objects. One can think of derivations of these concepts from specific contexts of analysis. Thus, it is possible to speak, without any epistemological damage, of: 1) media religion and mediatized religion, to focus on the institutional scope (e.g., websites and television programs created by religious institutions); 2) media religiosity and mediatized religiosity, media religiosity and mediatized religiosity, to specify objects that present institutional aspect, in which religious organizations are not directly responsible for their insertion in the media (e.g. WhatsApp prayer groups, lay pages on Facebook, etc.); 3) media spirituality and mediatized spirituality, when there are no institutional aspects (e.g., pages and profiles of healers, and new religious movements in digital media). The use of these terms already occurs in academic texts in the area, but still requires an effort of systematization, to be done in future works. ■

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